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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000717

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE TROOPS PURSUING ICRC KIDNAPPERS

REF: A. MANILA 703-PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT REJECTS
TERRORISTS' DEMANDS
[1](#)B. MANILA 686-RED CROSS KIDNAPPERS INCREASE DEMANDS

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador spoke with Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro April 2 to discuss the situation involving the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hostages being held by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) on Jolo Island. Referring to unconfirmed press reports that Swiss hostage Andreas Notter had been shot, Teodoro assured the Ambassador the government had no information to support this claim and the Philippine commander on the ground believed the hostages to be alive. Citing on-going operations, Teodoro said that the military had not located the kidnappers or hostages, coming up with "two dry holes," and but underscored the military was being extremely careful and moving very cautiously with the safety of the hostages in mind. The Ambassador emphasized the high degree of international interest in the situation and that every effort should be made to secure the hostages' safe release. Teodoro said the Philippine government was doing everything it could to act prudently, but had concluded there was nothing to be gained from negotiating with "irrational terrorists," a sentiment echoed by Foreign Secretary Romulo during lunch with the Ambassador April 2. Separately, ICRC Philippines Chief Jean-Daniel Tauxe told the Ambassador he had "more reason to be optimistic than pessimistic" by events during the last 24 hours, acknowledging that the ICRC had no confirmation on whether the hostages were dead or alive, but believed the Philippine military was handling the situation in a reassuring manner. END SUMMARY.

PHILIPPINE MILITARY SEARCHING FOR HOSTAGES

[1](#)2. (C) Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro updated the Ambassador April 2 on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hostages being held on Jolo Island by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists. Teodoro said that after the ASG terrorists failed to live up to their pledge to release a hostage March 21 after Philippine troops loosened their cordon around the terrorists' camp (ref B), the military had been ordered to close in around the ASG again. Led by two U.S.-trained Light Reaction Companies, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) had moved back into the four square kilometer area in which the ASG had been holding the hostages (ref A). According to Teodoro, the AFP's initial searches on the night of April 1-2 had turned up "two dry holes," and commanders suspected the ASG may have moved from the jungle into caves that dot the area. Determining the location of

the kidnappers and the hostages was complicated, he said, by the fact the AFP had disabled cellular communications in the area to prevent the ASG from contacting outside audiences. Referring to unconfirmed media reports of Swiss hostage Andreas Notter being shot by the ASG, Teodoro said there was no indication the reports were true.

CAUTIOUS APPROACH

13. (C) Teodoro emphasized that the Philippine military was being cautious in its operations to try to afford the hostages maximum safety. However, he reiterated that the government did not believe the ASG had any intent of honoring agreements regarding the hostages and had proven in the past to be capable of vicious, mindless acts of terrorism against civilians. The safety of the citizens of Jolo Island was at stake if the AFP withdrew back to its garrisons on the island as demanded by the kidnappers, Teodoro said, and that was unacceptable. The Philippine government now has clearly delineated the lines of authority for dealing with the kidnappers, and Sulu Governor Abdelsakur Tan is the primary interlocutor on Jolo Island, with Teodoro and Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno handling the issue at a policy level within the Cabinet.

ICRC LOOKING FOR POSITIVE SIGNS

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14. (C) In an April 2 conversation with Ambassador, ICRC Philippines Chief Jean-Daniel Tauxe said the ICRC had "more reason to be optimistic than pessimistic" by events during the last 24 hours. Tauxe acknowledged that the ICRC had no confirmation on whether the hostages were dead or alive, since all communications with the hostages had been severed. However, given that the ASG camps had not been stormed and that the ASG had made no announcements -- something they are prone to do in these situations -- there was hope the hostages were still unharmed. He explained that the ICRC felt particularly well briefed about military operations, as the military had allowed an ICRC official to follow events from inside the Philippine military headquarters on Jolo Island. Tauxe said he felt reassured by the manner in which the military had handled the situation thus far, as it clearly demonstrated the military's desire to protect the lives of the hostages, and praised Western Mindanao Command chief LTG Nelson Allaga for being "extremely communicative" about events on the ground.

MORE DISCIPLINED APPROACH

15. (C) Separately, Foreign Secretary Romulo told Ambassador April 2 that the government had conducted intense cabinet discussions on the need to balance its interest in saving the hostages against acceding to the ASG's demands that the government abdicate control of Jolo. Pointing out the government had shown exceptional restraint, Romulo observed that many citizens had forgotten that the ASG is not a reasonable organization, nor would it operate in good faith. The Ambassador commended Romulo on the government's more disciplined and coordinated approach to a very delicate situation and reiterated the USG's deep concern about the hostages' safety.

COMMENT

16. (C) In a notable display of reasoned analysis, the lead editorial in the Philippine Daily Inquirer took a harsh view

of the kidnappers and expressed deep sympathy for the victims and the plight of government negotiators, a sign that even among the jaded Philippine press, there was a stark realization of the gravity of the hostage situation. Calling the ASG a "cancer that remains malignant and unexcised," the editorial supported the government's decision to prepare for possible military operations to neutralize the kidnappers, saying it would have been a "dereliction of duty" for the military to agree to the ASG's demand to withdraw. Such commentary indicates that the Philippine public is coming to accept that the tendency to seek an expedient end to kidnapping by paying ransom only perpetuates the cycle of violence in the southern Philippines. In midst of this 11-week hostage ordeal, the Philippine government appears to have embraced a more coherent and carefully coordinated strategy. Once it is resolved, it remains to be seen whether this high-profile kidnapping will be the watershed event that moves the Philippine people to support more sustained action against terrorists such as the ASG. END COMMENT.

KENNEY